



SOFTWARE MONEY-SAVERS

You don't have to spend a fortune on big-brand software packages to make the most of your PC – just follow Tom Gorham's guide to cheap and free alternatives

How much are you prepared to pay for software? Would you happily pay hundreds of pounds for big-brand audio or video programs, or do you baulk at the cost of expensive software and make do with cheaper, almost as useful alternatives?

Getting your hands on quality software without breaking the bank can be difficult. When it comes to desktop publishing, for example, it's almost accepted that you have to pay the better part of £1,000 for the software to produce professional-looking publications, or that to run your business successfully you need expensive, subscription-based financial software.

However, it is possible to get the best of both worlds: quality software that doesn't cost the earth. Over the next few pages we'll list some of the free and low-cost software that's suitable for both professional and home use. Often the programs offer similar functionality to that of their market-leading rival at a fraction of their cost. In other cases they do an individual task better than their better-known equivalents. We'll tell you how easy to use each program is and what its limitations are. In short, everything you need to decide if you really do have to stick with the expensive program, or if you can save cash by opting for the cheaper version, is right here.

DESIGN AND GRAPHICS

DESKTOP PUBLISHING



Scribus

Price Free

From www.scribus.net

Of the many alternatives to Adobe InDesign and QuarkXPress, Scribus, an open-source desktop publishing (DTP) application originally built for Linux, is the most feature-complete.

It's hard not to be impressed by a free application that supports CMYK colour models; a rarity among budget DTP applications, but

vital for professional print. It includes colour management and exports to press-ready PDF files or PostScript. Scribus even checks to ensure your document is print-ready before output.

The program also has support for style sheets, layers and clipping paths. There's even a simple text editor called up through the same keyboard shortcut used by InDesign.

However, this isn't an application that newcomers to DTP will find easy to get to grips with. Some controls are hidden, and it's difficult to do simple things such as proportionally scale images. You'll also need to install additional utilities for accurate printing. Scribus also isn't as fast as InDesign, particularly on large tasks.

PagePlus

Price £49 inc VAT

From www.serif.com

Serif's PagePlus X2 is a budget-priced DTP application that deserves to be taken seriously by professionals. Any alternative to InDesign or QuarkXPress tends to struggle when it comes to professional printing; a quizzical eye would be raised if you handed over a native PagePlus file. However, PDF is becoming a pre-press file standard. PagePlus supports PDF/X, a subset of Adobe's PDF standard, which bundles colour separation information into a PDF document and enables colour-accurate production.



It's much simpler for those new to DTP to get the hang of, too, with optional wizards to take you through document creation.

If you're looking for the standard fare of high-end DTP – table of contents, indexing, transparency effects and bezier curves – you'll find them here. Also, PagePlus is better than established alternatives in some respects. It can edit and save PDF files and build HTML-based emails – try doing that in QuarkXPress.

Alternatives Adobe InDesign CS3 (£715); QuarkXPress 7 (£1,034)

IMAGE-EDITING

Photoshop Elements

Price £70 inc VAT

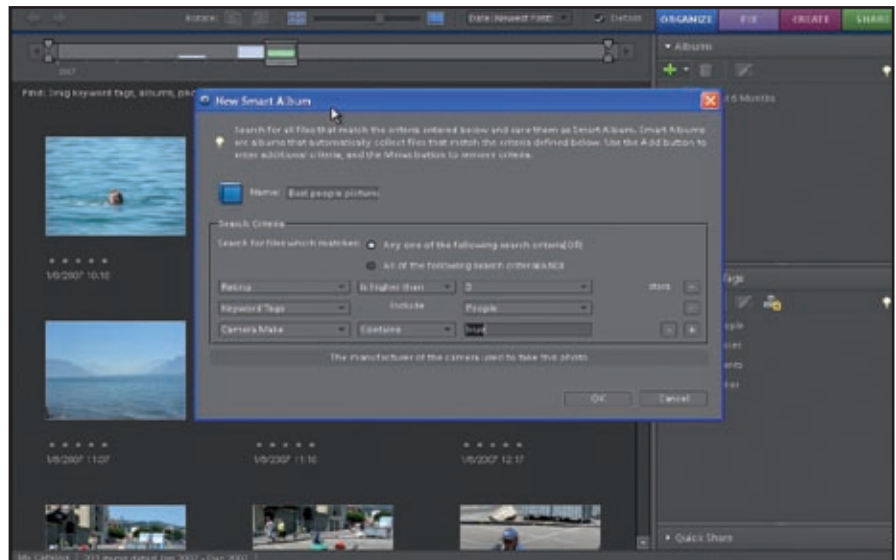
From www.adobe.com

No longer is Photoshop Elements the poor man's Adobe Photoshop. The newest version of Adobe's budget image editor and manager is more attractive than its big brother. Its sober slate grey background makes photos stand out. The program is also an outstanding organiser. It includes features such as facial recognition to allow quick keyword tagging, and smart albums, whose contents can be restricted by multiple criteria such as keyword, date or the rating you give a particular picture.

The program's features are sensibly divided into editing and organising workspaces, and the functions of each are organised under a clutch of gem-coloured, task-related tabs. This means that in most cases, Elements is much easier to navigate than Photoshop.

Unfortunately, Elements doesn't work in CMYK colour, so it isn't much use for print professionals. It also lacks several high-end adjustment, automation and editing tools.

But most people want an image editor so that they can correct blemishes and make adjustments to photos to print or use in websites. Elements simplifies this process. Its Quick Fix mode lets you adjust images by dragging sliders



▲ Photoshop Elements' budget price belies its power. Its superb organisational tools allow you to place photos in albums based on embedded metadata such as camera type or focal length

next to a window that previews the effect. A Guided Edit mode lists common editing tasks. Click on one and the tools you need to do it are shown, along with explanatory text.

Another frequently performed task is uploading and sharing images online. Photoshop Elements lets you create gorgeous Flash-based online galleries from your photos that are far more impressive than the ones you can create from Photoshop.

Elements 6's Photomerge lets you stitch shots together or combine facial elements to create a composite face. This feature may be based on Photoshop technology, but again, it's much easier to use in Elements.

If you're on a budget that prohibits even Elements' modest price, we'd recommend Google's Picasa (www.picasa.com) as an images organiser. It doesn't have as many editing features as Elements, but it's even easier to use and totally free.



GIMP

Price Free

From www.gimp.org/windows

GIMP is a free image-editing application suited to more technically savvy users than Elements, as well as those on a tight budget. It offers a hefty chunk of Photoshop's features, but doesn't cost a bean. For non-professional users, the real drawback is its unintuitive interface, which takes some getting used to.

Otherwise, only high-end users will miss features from Photoshop that aren't found here, such as support for adjustment layers, which allow non-destructive image adjustment. It also lacks Pantone colour matching and, like Elements, there's no built-in support for the CMYK colour space. However, GIMP provides a good grounding for learning the craft of image editing.

Alternative Adobe Photoshop (£500)

AUDIO/VIDEO/MULTIMEDIA

AUDIO EDITING



Audacity

Price Free

From <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>

The open-source Audacity is an audio recorder and editor – and a podcast-maker's dream.

If you're just looking to record audio to your hard disk, it doesn't come much simpler. Just click on the program's chunky record button and Audacity will record from your audio input straight to your hard disk. But Audacity's editing tools match its more expensive commercial alternatives. For example, you can combine tracks, quickly cut audio, import audio from multiple formats, and dub over existing tracks to create multi-track audio mixes. It's also highly extensible. You can add VST plug-ins, popular at the professional end of the market, which provide a visual interface similar to the physical switches and knobs on audio hardware.

Audacity can import and export Ogg Vorbis, MP3 and Wav files. However, like most audio editors it cannot import protected files from music stores.

Alternative Adobe Soundbooth (£163)

3D MODELLING

Google Sketchup

Price Free

From www.sketchup.com

Here's a tool that finally makes 3D modelling as simple as 2D drawing. To create a model in Google Sketchup, you simply drag your mouse to draw shapes, then use its Push/Pull tool to extend these into three dimensions.

Sketchup's unique tools include the ability to import a digital image and adjust a 3D perspective grid over it so that the model matches the image. It isn't a replacement for the market-leading AutoCAD LT, and is best used alongside it to generate models quickly. You can even import drawings created in AutoCAD's DWG and DXF formats.

If you need advanced control of materials and lighting effects, you'll have to look elsewhere. Sketchup's greatest achievement is making it easy to quickly generate 3D designs from scratch, but you'll have to upgrade to Sketchup Pro (£256) to export most of its models to other 3D applications.

Alternative AutoCAD LT (£745)

VIDEO EDITING



VirtualDub

Price Free

From www.virtualdub.org

VirtualDub is an open-source capture, editing and file format transcoding tool that is fairly straightforward to use. However, beginners could find it a little difficult to get started, as you may need to spend time hunting around for suitable codecs to let the program deal with some video formats. For example, it's happiest dealing with AVI files and so is ideal if you want to tidy up or dub AVI footage. However, you'll need to download a DivX plugin to get it to work with DivX movies.

VirtualDub is based around Video for Windows (VfW), an older Windows standard not supported by some digital video devices, so you may need to download a compatible codec to import video from a digital video camera.

Adobe's Premiere Elements has more features and a more intuitive interface, but once you've got VirtualDub working the way you want it, it's a fast and efficient video editor.

Alternative Adobe Premiere Elements (£70)



OFFICE AND PRODUCTIVITY

OFFICE SUITE



OpenOffice

Price Free

From www.openoffice.org

Alternatives to Microsoft's excellent, but pricy, Office suite seem to be sprouting up all over the place. Online alternatives such as Google Docs (www.google.com) and Zoho (www.zoho.com) are useful only while you have a connection to the internet. The nearest desktop match to Office is OpenOffice, which includes writing, drawing, spreadsheet and presentation applications. It is open source, so free to use.

OpenOffice's word processor, Writer, feels similar to Word, and does a great job of opening native Word documents, even those with tracked changes. While Writer misses out some Word features, such as grammar checking and smart tags, it has a few tricks of its own, such as the ability to save to PDF. Its Excel equivalent does a similarly good job of importing Excel workbooks, apart from those that use pivot tables. The presentation module isn't as compatible with PowerPoint, but a useful feature is the ability to export presentations to Flash format. Another handy plus is the way you can launch any of the suite's document types from inside the application you're currently using. So you can launch one application, such as Calc, from within another application, such as Writer.

OpenOffice lacks an email program, and the absence of a relational database to match Microsoft Office's Access will bother some. But for everyone else, this is a fine alternative.

Alternative Microsoft Office 2007 Standard (£350)

WORD PROCESSOR



AbiWord

Price Free

From www.abisource.com

What if you don't want or need every Office feature under the sun? When it comes to word processing, the features available in Microsoft Word are hard to beat. But it may also be the best software example of the Pareto principle: where 80 per cent of its users use only 20 per cent of its features.

AbiWord 2.4.6 has a spartan interface and is reminiscent of the simplicity of Microsoft Word a decade or so ago. It has enough features for those with simple word-processing or report-writing needs. For example, it can create headers and footers, and the program includes an equation editor. We like the ability to create mail merges from sources such as CSV spreadsheets.

AbiWord is also extensible through plug-ins, which add features such as a thesaurus to the program.

Alternative Microsoft Word 2007 Home and Student Edition (£65)

PERSONAL FINANCE

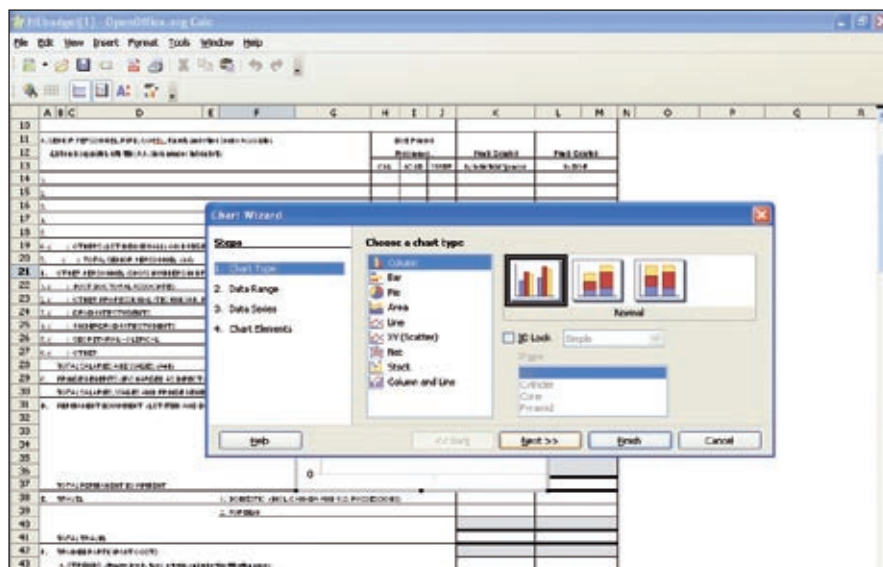


Grisbi

Price Free

From www.grisbi.org

Grisbi may have an odd name – it's French slang for money – but it's a surprisingly powerful



▲ Unless you're wedded to particular features in Excel, OpenOffice Calc is a great replacement. It only struggles occasionally with charts and more esoteric Excel features

personal finance manager. An alternative to Microsoft Money, it can cope with multiple accounts, currencies and users. It also imports and exports QIF files, so as long as your online bank supports this format, you can import your bank account transactions quickly.

You can allocate your spending to particular categories, but also split transactions to apply a particular income or expenditure to more than one spending or income category. Grisbi doesn't do double-entry accounting, which is why it isn't suited to business use. But this may be a plus for most home users, who don't need the headaches that double-entry accounting can create.

Unfortunately, Grisbi isn't all that straightforward to get up and running. It would also be nice if you could see a more graphical overview of your financial situation. However, it's a good first stop if you're trying to get your finances into some order.

Alternative Microsoft Money (£30)

BUSINESS FINANCE

Microsoft Office Accounting Express

Price Free

From www.msofficeaccounting.co.uk

When it comes to pricing financial applications aimed at the business market, it almost feels like software developers think of a large number and then add a zero to the end. However, things are changing. In a market dominated by QuickBooks Pro, there's a new competitor: the free Microsoft Office Accounting Express.

Express doesn't scrimp on features; there's full support for UK VAT, for example. It is designed for inexperienced users who might be more used to trotting out their accounts in Excel. A simple setup wizard and a Quick Start window, which gives one-click access to common tasks such as invoicing, are a boon to beginners. The program also includes a Resource Centre area that houses useful business topics including training, user forums and RSS feeds of industry news.

The program's customisable home page gives an overview of your financial status, including a handy chart of cashflow, which is vital to any small business.

Given its name, it's no surprise that Accounting's big selling point is its integration with Microsoft's Office suite. For example, you can quickly export reports to Excel workbooks with column headings and formulae intact, for example. It will work happily with documents created in OpenOffice, too.

There are limitations. Accounting doesn't offer multi-currency support, and QuickBooks Pro is a better option if you need features such as stock control or payroll. Even so, it's hard to think of a better free application for businesses.

Alternative QuickBooks Pro (£299)

PDF AUTHORIZING PROGRAM

Nitro PDF

Price \$84 (around £42)

From www.nitropdf.com

As PDFs become an office standard, the ability to edit and repurpose them has become a necessity. While the free Adobe Acrobat Reader can open PDFs and add comments, serious editing needs the expensive Acrobat Professional. Unless, that is, you plump for the cut-price alternative: Nitro PDF.

Nitro PDF is a match for its more expensive rival. It lets you create PDFs from scratch and, like Acrobat, it installs itself as an add-in to Word and Excel, allowing you to create PDFs directly from those applications. Nitro PDF also installs a system-level printer driver so you can create PDFs from any application.

Its editing abilities are excellent. For instance, you can copy and paste directly into an open PDF. You can also insert headers, footers, watermarks, numbering and over multiple pages. The program is a good option for filling in and creating PDF forms.

Anyone opening a Nitro PDF-created document won't be aware that it was created by a program other than Adobe Acrobat. The files you create in Nitro can be opened in Reader and Acrobat and are virtually indistinguishable from Acrobat-created documents.

Its drawback is that there isn't yet the same range of plug-ins that are available for Acrobat. But unless you rely on these, this is a cut-price way into PDF editing.

Alternative Adobe Acrobat 8 Professional (£443)



NETWORKING

REMOTE ACCESS

VNC Free Edition
Price Free (pre-Vista version);
 £14 inc VAT (Vista-compatible version)
From www.realvnc.com

LogMeIn
Price Free
From www.logmein.com

If you've upgraded to Windows XP Professional or the more expensive versions of Vista, you can already access your PC from anywhere through the Remote Access feature. But if you can't justify the upgrade or are still stuck with an earlier Windows version, you don't have to plump for the market-leading third-party remote control software, GoToMyPC.

Instead you can use VNC (Virtual Network Computing), a cross-platform technology with two parts: a client on the machine attempting to connect, and a server on the machine you want to control. VNC Free Edition 4.1 is available for pre-Vista machines. Vista users need the Personal Edition, which costs £14. Install the server on one machine, the client on the other, and you can control the host PC over an internet connection.

The drawback of VNC, aside from the fact that you can't transfer files, is that it can be difficult to establish a VNC connection between two PCs protected by firewalls. If this is a problem, there's a good, free option available.



▲ The free version of LogMeIn works only with one PC, but it is cross-platform. Here we're controlling a PC from a Mac across the internet

LogMeIn's basic version of its web-based software requires no software on the client machine. You must install an 8MB application that runs in the background on your host PC, but that's it. The result: you can access your home PC from any computer or mobile device with a web browser that can run JavaScript.

One problem with connections over the internet to another PC is that of security. You may feel that your PC is exposed, especially as unlike many remote access applications LogMeIn hurdles firewall and router obstructions with no problem. The reassurance is that you can only connect to your home PC through the LogMeIn website, which uses an SSL-secure gateway.

There are limitations to the free version. You can control only a single PC and you'll have

to upgrade to the Pro version if you need 256-bit encryption, file transfer or remote printing.

Alternative GoToMyPC (£120pa)

VPN
OpenVPN
Price Free
From <http://openvpn.net>

VNC connections are fine for occasional use or if you don't need to transfer files. For more secure remote networking, you'll need Virtual Private Network (VPN) software, which allows private network access over public connections. VPN creates a secure tunnel between two machines and allows data to pass between them, free of snooping. For sharing data between offices, it's a lot cheaper than leased lines.

The cost of bespoke VPN hardware and software can run into thousands, and in general VPN networks are aimed at large businesses. However, there's no reason why you can't install your own VPN network using your home PC. Windows already has VPN client tools – you can set up a connection to a VPN server through XP or Vista's network control panel. The server side of things can be handled by OpenVPN. It's awkward to get up and run, however, and the console-style window it starts with isn't user friendly. Fortunately, a Windows front-end is available from <http://openvpn.se>.

Alternative Cisco VPN (single licence from £20)

SECURITY

ANTI-VIRUS

AVG Free Edition
Price Free
From <http://free.grisoft.com>

Given that buying and updating anti-virus software is an expense most Windows users would cheerily do without, it's surprising that an excellent and long-standing and free anti-virus software, AVG Free Edition, hasn't had more attention than it has. It certainly deserves it.

The free version of AVG may look slightly clunky, but its appearance belies surprising power. It has a better success rate at finding viruses on your system than similar-known commercial scanners such as Norton AntiVirus or McAfee VirusScan. It allows you to run checks

on demand and even schedule basic scans. However, unlike subscription-based antivirus tools, you'll have to update your virus definitions manually.

The downside to AVG Anti-Virus is a bit annoying, but understandable: there's no technical support until you upgrade to the paid-for version. It's also important to remember that, unlike most commercial applications, AVG Anti-Virus doesn't protect you against other threats, such as spyware or Trojans.

Alternative Norton AntiVirus 2008 (£40)

ANTI-SPYWARE
AVG Anti-Spyware
Price Free
From <http://free.grisoft.com>

If AVG Anti-Virus doesn't scan for spyware, the best option is to look for a cut-price program that does; and it happens to be another AVG program, AVG Anti-Spyware. Anti-Spyware works best when manually scanning your hard disk rather than active downloads.

AVG Anti-Spyware automatically updates your definition files for 30 days, after which you'll either have to upgrade to the full commercial version or update files manually.

With little discernible impact on system resources, Anti-Spyware automates the scanning process and scans files on execution. It can also scan inside archives and you can delete tracking cookies automatically. Again, there's no documentation or support for the

free version, and no real-time protection. Even so, it's a great tool.

Alternative Norton AntiVirus 2008 (£40)

FIREWALL

Sunbelt Kerio Personal Firewall
Price £10 inc VAT
From www.sunbelt-software.com

Protecting your PC from outside attack is best achieved by installing a firewall. The firewall built into Windows Vista (see *Advanced Projects* on page 144) may be more powerful than its predecessors, but it's still lacking in several ways. For example, it's difficult to tweak outbound filtering, which makes it hard to manage malware that might want to make an outbound connection.

That means that a standalone firewall program is still worth getting, and Microsoft sells its own protection, Windows Live OneCare, which includes anti-virus protection for up to three PCs. But you can do just as well with a cheaper product. There are two versions of Sunbelt Kerio Personal Firewall: a free one and a commercial version. The full version is certainly a tenner well spent.

Once installed, Kerio's simple tabbed window gives clear access to firewall settings and provides you with a whole host of useful extras, including the ability to block cookies and prevent sensitive data being entered into website forms.

Alternative Windows Live OneCare (£25)



▲ AVG Anti-Virus has been around in many guises since 1991. Despite looking dated, it's the most powerful free antivirus tool around, more than matching its commercial rivals



UTILITIES

ARCHIVE EXTRACTION

ExtractNow

Price Free

From www.extractnow.com

Windows has built-in support for creating and extracting Zip files, but it's not very advanced. If you want more control and want to work with different types of archives, such as .rar and .iso files, there's no need to go down the commercial route.

ExtractNow can handle all of these file types, and lets you extract multiple archives at once. However, it doesn't let you create archives, so you'll still need WinZip or Windows for this.

Alternative WinZip 11 Standard (£25)

CD BURNING

CDBurnerXP

Price Free

From <http://cdburnerxp.se>

Despite its name, CD BurnerXP is a CD and DVD burner that works in Windows Vista, too. It's simple to use. When it first launches, CDBurnerXP presents you with a choice between data disc and audio CD creation. The main, intimidating text-heavy window has a couple of tricks up its sleeve, such as the ability to burn and create ISO files. These types of files hold the exact contents of an optical disc on your hard disk. It can also create gapless audio CDs and bootable discs.

Otherwise, there are no fancy extras, such as the backup features and photo-editing tools that you find in commercial alternatives such as Roxio Easy Media Creator Suite. Neither are there any format conversion tools that let you rip DVDs audio and video CDs to other formats. But if you just want your CD-burning software to burn discs, CDBurnerXP is ideal.

Alternative Roxio Easy Media Creator Suite 10 (£50)

VIRTUAL DRIVE SOFTWARE

Daemon Tools

Price Free

From www.daemon-tools.cc

Burning images of discs using CDBurnerXP is a great way to create backup disc images of your most important CDs and DVDs. To run the images effectively in Windows, you could burn them back to disc. However, it's far quicker to use Daemon Tools, a DVD/CD-ROM emulator that lets you treat disc images as real CDs.

Daemon Tools boots automatically when Windows starts up. It's a great way of testing that you've made an accurate disc copy without having to burn a CD.

Alternative VirtualDrive 11.5 (£15)

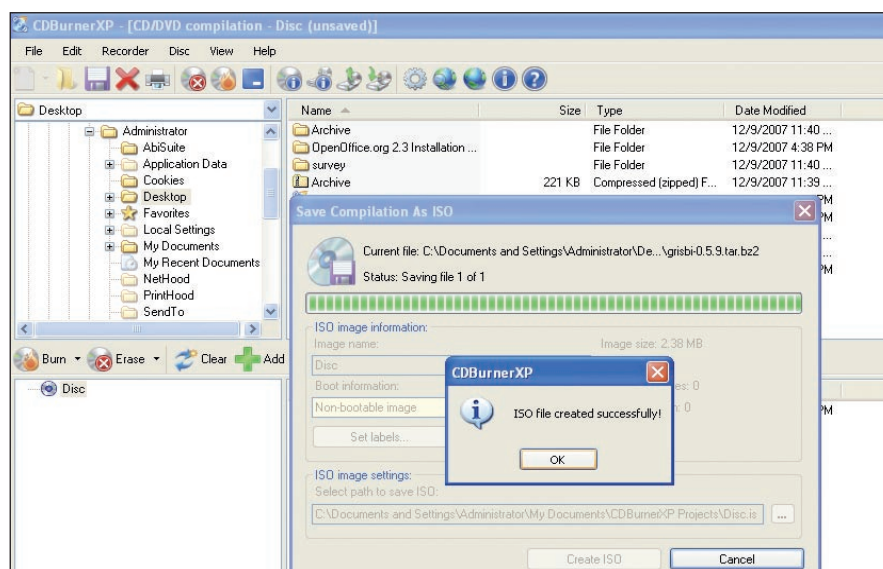
DISK CLONING

Drivelmage XML

Price Free

From www.runtime.org/dixml.htm

Keeping a mirror image of your hard disk on an external device helps protect against the ultimate disaster: hard disk failure. The good



▲ CDBurner XP divides its window into panes showing source media at the top and what you're about to burn at the bottom. But you can also create .ISO disc images quickly

news is that you don't have to invest in expensive drive-imaging software to do so.

DriveImage XML lets you create a backup image of any drive or partition to an image file and then browse and restore it to another partition. You can even schedule automatic backups. Uniquely, the header information about the backup is in XML format, so it's easily readable by other applications. DriveImage is limited to backing up entire drives, though, so you can't configure it to copy individual files or folders, and you can't encrypt data.

Alternative Norton Ghost 12 (£40)

VIDEO CONVERSION

Handbrake

Price Free

From <http://handbrake.m0k.org>

Super©

Price Free

From www.erightsoft.com

In an increasingly mobile world, who watches movies on their DVD player any more?

Handbrake lets you turn DVD-based video into a format suitable for viewing on an iPod or other portable device that can read MPEG4 or AVI video formats, too.

Converting a DVD isn't as difficult as you might think. You just select the DVD as the source inside the program and then tweak one of the presets. Handbrake includes a clutch of prepared presets for popular export formats.

Super© is the Swiss Army knife of video converters. Its interface may look unpolished, but it includes a huge range of video input and output options. What most users will find useful is the ability to convert web-based Flash video (.flv) files to a standard format, as well as being able to grab and convert video from a mobile phone.

To do this, you simply drag the source video into Super©'s window, and from the Select the Output Container menu, choose the format to convert it to, whether iPod or WMV. Then click the Encode button and Super© works its way through your file.

Alternatives Roxio Copy & Convert 3 (£20); AVS Video Tools (£35)

MEDIA PLAYBACK

GB-PVR

Price Free

From www.gb-pvr.com

VLC

Price Free

From www.videolan.org/vlc

Windows Media Center is one of Vista's shining lights, but it's only available in Vista's Home Premium or Ultimate versions. If you balk at the cost of those, the free GB-PVR is an excellent alternative.

The interface isn't quite as attractive as Windows Media Center or that of another commercial alternative, CyberLink PowerCinema. However, GB-PVR is presentable and responsive.

Once installed, GB-PVR automatically runs its configuration routine to set up your capture source, such as a TV card. It also sets up your recording source and your electronic programme guide settings. The guide is the same one that is available to Freeview devices in the UK.

Once you've selected a programme to record, you can put your PC to sleep. It will automatically wake from standby mode, record the programme and go back into standby mode.

GB-PVR's plugins include all sorts of useful add-ons, such as burning DVDs from an MPEG source and even the ability to read RSS feeds in the program.

Want to play QuickTime movies full screen? You'll need for fork out for a QuickTime Pro licence – unless, that is, you opt to switch to VLC. This program plays QuickTime videos, as well as just about any other media format you can throw at it, smoothly at full screen.

But that's not VLC's greatest money-saving secret. You can use it to stream video live across a network. Its Videolan Server can stream MPEG files, DVDs, TV channels and even live video. Home networks should cope with MPEG streaming just fine, although streaming straight from a DVD will require a fairly speedy connection.

Alternatives CyberLink PowerCinema 5 (£50); QuickTime Pro (£15)



INTERNET AND COMMUNICATIONS

WEBSITE CREATION

ON THE COVER DISC **KompoZer**
Price Free
From www.kompozer.net

Sometimes it seems that web designers face a grim dilemma: either hand-code a website using a free text editor or shell out a lot of cash for a WYSIWYG editor such as Adobe's Dreamweaver or Microsoft Expression Web Designer. But there is an alternative for the canny designer.

KompoZer is a WYSIWYG editor that can trace its heritage back to Netscape's Composer web editor. KompoZer makes it easy to build a site from scratch, although you can also import existing HTML files. There are useful HTML tools here, including a code cleaner and validator to help ensure your site is accessible. It also has a Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) editor to ensure typographical consistency.

KompoZer even has its own FTP engine, which means that in most cases you can upload files directly to your website. KompoZer has nothing like Dreamweaver's feature list, but this does mean that the interface is less cluttered. However, we did find it rather clunky to use. KompoZer makes different views, such as Preview and Code, available under separate tabs. An HTML tag view shows the structure of your HTML document.

KompoZer isn't as good as Dreamweaver, but it can produce good results even if you're an HTML novice. The fact that it's free is a bonus.

Alternative Dreamweaver CS3 (£393)

WEBSITE ANALYSIS

Google Analytics

Price Free
From www.google.com/analytics

When you've got your website running, the best way to expand it is by working out who's visiting your pages and how they find your site. Web-analysis software provides a lot of information about site visitors, but many applications cost.

The best site analysis tool for small sites is Mint (<http://haveamint.com>), which costs \$30

(around £15) for every website you install it on, but this requires specific server software to be installed. For those who don't have the money to spend, it's hard to see past Google's less elegant, but more detailed Analytics.

Analytics is a hosted service, which means you check your site's statistics on Google's site, rather than your own. The main advantage of this is that you just need to install a bit of code on each page that you want tracked. It can even work on hosted blog services, such as Blogger. The downside is that you're relying on a third-party service to give you information.

It gives you a graphical analysis of site visits, the URL they visited from, the search terms they used to find you and how long they spent on your pages.

Alternative Mint (£15)

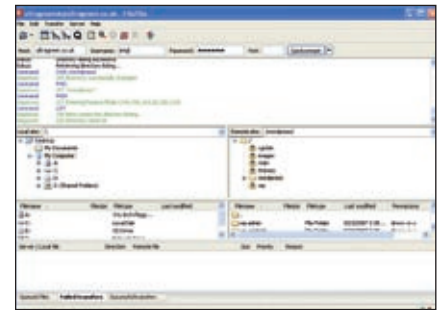
FTP

ON THE COVER DISC **FileZilla**
Price Free
From <http://filezilla-project.org>

The file transfer protocol might seem passé in the web 2.0 era, especially when FTP features are often built into web-editing applications. These are often poorly implemented, however, and a dedicated FTP application is usually the fastest way to transfer a file over the internet, especially large files that can often be blocked by your ISP if you're trying to send by email.

There are lots of good-quality commercial FTP applications (WS_FTP Home is among the best known), but for free alternatives look no further than FileZilla. Connecting to an FTP site with FileZilla could hardly be simpler. Just enter your login details and the FTP address and click the Quickconnect button. It's speedy and supports most popular transfer formats. As well as standard FTP, it understands secure FTP and FTP over SSL/TLS (FTPS). It can automatically adjust transfer speeds depending on the time of day. It doesn't support WebDav folders and can't automate file transfers, but it's ideal for uploading occasional files to your website.

Alternative WS_FTP Home (£20 with no support)



▲ FileZilla displays the contents of your local drive next to your remote directory. Once connected to your FTP site, drag files between them to upload

INTERNET TELEPHONY

Skype

Price Free
From www.skype.com

No money-saving guide would be complete without a reference to Skype, the free internet telephony application. There are plenty of Voice-over IP (VoIP) applications around, but Skype's huge user base, coupled with the fact that voice and video calls between Skype users are free, makes it the most popular.

Its advantage over conventional phone calls is financial. It costs a little over 1p a minute to call Australia and the USA, while for £30 a year you can have your own Skype number, which can be based anywhere in the world.

Skype isn't perfect. It isn't a full replacement for your phone, as you can't make emergency calls on it. There are also startup costs beyond the cost of calling. You'll need a headset and microphone for starters, and if you want to use Skype when your PC is turned off you'll need a dedicated Skype phone.

Some users have complained that Skype's call quality isn't as good as standard telephone lines. One tip to check the quality of your calls is to select Tools, Options, Advanced and turn on the Display Technical Call Info option. This lists statistics about your calls. Check the Roundtrip reading. It should be under 100ms. If it isn't, it could be a problem with your router or a configuration issue. Once those problems are corrected, Skype normally performs well.

Alternative BT Together (UK calls 3.25p per minute)

RSS

Omea Reader

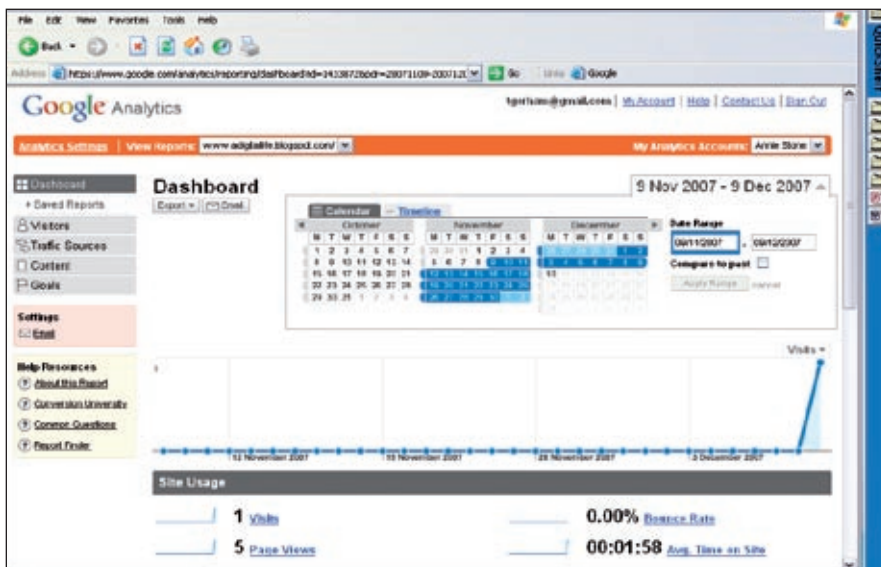
Price Free
From www.jetbrains.com/omea

RSS aggregators are a great way to gather links to news updates from the growing number of websites that offer compatible feeds, but the most popular and best Windows RSS reader, FeedDemon 2.5, costs £15.

So if you're up for saving a bit of cash, pick up a free one. Of the free desktop-based clients, Omea Reader 2.2 is the best.

That's because Omea is far more than an RSS reader. Omea will also subscribe to your favourite UseNet newsgroups, and it manages web bookmarks, too. Its paid-for sibling, Omea Pro, can even send and receive emails and archive webpages as well as messages from instant messaging clients.

Alternative FeedDemon 2.5 (£15) **CS**



▲ Google Analytics may be free, but it's more powerful than some commercial applications – and it's available for any website, too